**Supererogation**

**Abstract**

It is a recognizable feature of commonsense morality that some actions are beyond the call of duty or supererogatory. Acts of supererogation raise a number of interesting philosophical questions and debates. This article will provide an overview of three of these debates. First, I will provide an overview of the debate about whether or not acts of supererogation exist. Next, I will investigate the issue of how to define the supererogatory. I will finish by examining a problem known as the Paradox of Supererogation.

**Introduction**

Suppose someone decides to donate a kidney to a complete stranger. Despite the clear moral value of this action, it does not seem to be one that she was morally obliged to perform. Examples like this have persuaded many philosophers of the need to make room in moral theory for acts that are supererogatory or beyond the call of duty. This article will examine three issues that have been the focus of much of the recent literature on supererogation. First, in Section One, I will investigate the debate about whether acts of supererogation exist. Then, in Section Two, I will provide an overview of the debates concerning how supererogation should be defined. Section Three will provide an overview of the debate about the Paradox of Supererogation.

1. **Do Supererogatory Acts Exist?**

In this section, I will provide an overview of the debate about whether acts of supererogation exist. I will begin by examining three arguments in favour of the existence of acts of supererogation, two by J.O. Urmson and one by Claire Benn. I will then consider two arguments against the existence of acts of supererogation proposed by Susan Hale and others.

In his ‘Saints and Heroes’ (1958/1969), Urmson argued that in order for a moral theory to be acceptable it must make room for acts that are supererogatory. To support this claim, Urmson gave an example of a group of soldiers practicing throwing live hand grenades. One soldier loses his grip of a grenade, which falls in the midst of the group; a second soldier throws himself upon the grenade, sacrificing his life to protect the others. The second soldier’s act is clearly morally good but, says Urmson (1958/1969: 63), goes beyond what could reasonably be considered a duty.

Urmson points to two features of this act that give us reason to think that it is not obligatory. First, it would be inappropriate for someone, a superior for example, to demand that the soldier perform this act. This suggests that this act is not morally required because, when someone has a duty to act in a certain way, it is appropriate to demand that they do so (eg. Mill 1861/2001: 49). Similarly, it would be inappropriate to blame someone who did not act as the soldier did. This is important because it is generally thought that there is a tight connection between moral obligations and blameworthiness (See, for example, Darwall 2006: 97; McElwee 2010: 400; Mill 1861/2001: 49; and Portmore 2011: 43). Together, these give us good reason to think the soldier’s sacrificial act was not morally required. If we also accept that the soldier’s act was morally good, then we have good reason to think that the act was morally good but not morally required. In other words, it looks to be a case of supererogation. I will call this argument the Argument from Moral Experience.

There are several responses that have been made to the Argument from Moral Experience. First, Roger Crisp (2013) criticizes the intuitions underpinning this argument. In particular, he notes that such intuitions are largely shaped by the legacy of Christianity, and seem to not emerge if we adopt alternative ethical frameworks (Aristotelian ethics, for example, had no room for the concept of supererogation). This, Crisp claims, gives us reason to be cautious about giving too much weight to our intuitions about supererogation. And while Crisp’s point that the intuitive plausibility of the claim that acts of supererogation exist would not be shared across all times and cultures is worth noting, Christianity is far from the only ethical tradition to make room for supererogation. Similar ideas exist in other the Abrahamic ethical traditions of Islam and Judaism (Moghaddam, Novoa and Warren 2012 p.798). Similarly, John Ladd (1957) claimed that the concept existed in the ethical system of Navajo Native Americans. While these intuitions may not be universal they are also not as parochial as Crisp suggests.

A second response to the Argument from Moral Experience is that the category of supererogation is not needed to capture our important intuitions. Susan Hale (1991) and Marcia Baron (2016) argue that the important intuitions appealed to by proponents of supererogation in discussing cases like Urmson’s soldier can be captured by understanding these acts as imperfect duties. Baron’s discussion includes a particularly clear discussion of the comparative merits of interpreting these cases in terms of supererogation or imperfect duty.

In addition to his argument from moral experience, Urmson (1958/1969) also provides a utility argument for supererogation. Specifically, Urmson contends that a moral code which makes room for supererogation has five advantages over one that does not. Such a code would (i) protect the special stringency of moral requirements, (ii) stop morality from breaking down by demanding too much of ordinary people, (iii) be formulable, (iv) keep clear exactly what can be demanded, and (v) allow for the special value of free choice in moral action. For these reasons, the code that allows for supererogatory actions is preferable to one that does not. Crisp (2013) denies all five of these advantages arguing: (i) that we can protect the special urgency of some duties by creating two categories of duty, (ii) that we can deny supererogation whilst not demanding too much of ordinary people by creating a special class of duties that apply only to the virtuous, (iii) that very demanding duties can be easily formulated, (iv) that there is reason to deny the link between duties and demands and (v) that there is no reason to think that there is special value in actions which are free from the constraints of duty.

Claire Benn (2017) provides a different argument in support of the existence of acts of supererogation. Benn argues that accepting the existence of other moral phenomena commits us to the existence of acts of supererogation. The first moral feature that Benn points to (and the only I will examine here) are *paired rights*, rights that involve an entitlement both to perform and to omit from performing a particular action. Benn (2017: 279) points out that many paired rights are such that some of the acts that the agent is entitled to perform will be morally better than others. For example, I am fully entitled to drink my cup of coffee, but choosing to give it to someone more in need of a warm drink may be morally better. This means that giving the coffee away is a morally good act that is not morally required and is better than other acts we are permitted to perform (e.g. drinking the coffee myself). Hence giving the coffee away is supererogatory. So, if we accept that paired rights exist and that on some occasions there will be better and worse acts that our paired right entitles us to perform, then we should accept that acts of supererogation exist.

Despite these arguments, not everyone is convinced that acts of supererogation exist. Susan Hale (1991) argues that two recognizable features of our moral life are in tension with the existence of supererogation. First, Hale (1991: 273) points out that it is common practice to offer excuses for our failure to perform an act that might commonly be thought of as supererogatory. For example, to borrow a case from Hale, imagine that my blind neighbor asks me to spend several hours reading aloud from a textbook into her tape recorder. This is exactly the kind of act that many would claim to be a clear case of supererogation. However, as Hale points out, in many such cases, we feel that, if we were to refuse to help our neighbor, then we should offer some excuse. Refusing to help without offering an explanation would appear rude or callous, and we might rightly blame such a person. This does not sit easily with the claim that this act is supererogatory, as it seems strange to think that we need to offer an excuse for omitting to perform an act that we are not required to perform.

Several responses to this argument are available. First, it is not obvious that the need for excuses applies to all acts commonly thought of as supererogatory. Importantly, while it is plausible when the costs of performing the supererogatory act are low, for more costly cases it is less clear that we would expect people to offer an excuse for not performing the act. For example, it seems unlikely that we would expect an excuse from those soldiers in Urmson’s scenario who didn’t dive on the grenade. Gregory Trianosky (1986: 27-30) suggests another response to the problem, which distinguishes between moral criticism for performing a wrong act and for the possession of a vice. If we accept this, then the offering of an excuse for the decision not to perform a supererogatory act no longer seems puzzling: offering an excuse for failing to perform an act of supererogation can now be understood as an attempt to avert any negative judgement that may be made about our character traits, rather than as an explanation for our failing to perform the act itself.

The second feature of moral life that has been claimed by both Hale (1991: 273) and Stephen Finlay (2008: 144-145) to cast doubt on supererogation is that those who perform saintly or heroic acts claim that they *had* to act as they did. I will call this the Problem of Heroic Testimony. Taking the saints and heroes at their word, this means their actions are not supererogatory, since they were required. Alternatively, if we think of the relevant actions as genuinely supererogatory, we’re forced to say that the saints and heroes who make such reports are misguided.

Alternatively, one could argue that these reports are not best understood as describing an experience of moral obligation. Kyle Fruh (2014: 98-99; 2017) argues that these experiences are more plausibly interpreted as reporting an experience of what Bernard Williams (1981: 130) calls a *practical necessity*, a form of necessity grounded in the normative character of the agent. Relatedly, we might think, as argued in Archer (2015), that many of these experiences are more accurately described as cases of *moral incapacity*, another term coined by Williams (1993), which are practical necessities that reflect the moral outlook of the agent. As Williams (1993) makes clear, these incapacities are not equivalent to moral requirements. We can then understand the testimony of saints and heroes as describing a moral necessity rather than a moral obligation, meaning that we have no reason to think that the relevant acts are obligatory rather than supererogatory.

This response to the Problem of Heroic Testimony works well for some of the testimony that critics of supererogation appeal to in arguing against the existence of supererogatory acts. However, not all such testimony is plausibly understood as expressing a moral necessity; some is expressed explicitly in terms of moral *duty* (see the examples in Archer and Ridge 2015: 1578). So not all of the problematic testimony can be explained in terms of moral necessity.

A second way of handling this problematic testimony is to note that while saints and heroes may describe their actions as required this differs from the way in which onlookers would describe these same actions. Vanessa Carbonell (2012: 231) describes this as, “a persistent agent-observer disparity.” In assessing this argument then, we should ask ourselves whether we have reason to think that saints and heroes are authorities on the deontic status of their actions. Finlay (2008: 145) provides two reasons to think that saints and heroes should be considered authoritative. First, they are more likely than other people to have engaged in sustained reflection about moral issues. Second, those who do not perform these acts have a clear motive to engage in self-deception about the deontic status of these actions, as this will allow them to continue their lives without troubling their conscience. This gives us reason to think that saints are in a privileged epistemic position about the deontic status of these actions compared to other people.

However, it is not clear how persuaded we should be by either of these points. The claim that saints and heroes have engaged in more reflection about moral issues is an unsupported empirical claim. Moreover, the claim about how demanding our obligations are might be thought to be not just a moral issue but a question concerning the appropriate balance between morality and self-interest. This means that those who are more wholeheartedly committed to moral values may not be in an epistemically privileged position to weigh these two competing values accurately (See Archer and Ridge 2015: 1587).

A third response is to claim that the relevant acts may indeed be obligatory for the saints and heroes, but this need not rule out the possibility that these same acts would be supererogatory for others. Carbonell (2016) argues that how much morality can demand of us is going to depend in part on facts about the particular agent that we are. In particular, Carbonell (2016: 45-48) claims that some of our obligations are knowledge-based, meaning that those with more knowledge will face more demanding levels of obligation. Along similar lines, Flescher (2003: 148) argues that saints and heroes have more demanding duties than the rest of us as a result of having an expanded sense of duty. Ordinary people are right to see saintly and heroic acts as supererogatory (for them) but saints and heroes are right to see their acts as obligatory (for them). And while we might worry that such a move could justify moral complacency on the part of those who are not saints and heroes already, Flescher (2003 Ch.5) addresses such concerns by appeal to the idea that we each have a moral obligation to morally improve ourselves, and so to expand our sense of duty.[[1]](#footnote-1)

I have provided a brief overview of the debates surrounding the existence of supererogatory acts. It is noticeable from this overview the important role that the testimony of saints and heroes plays in these debates. An important topic for future work in this area would be to investigate in more detail how we should weigh this testimony, particularly when it conflicts with the moral experience of more ordinary moral agents.

1. **What is Supererogation?**

In the previous section I gave an overview of the arguments for and against thinking that acts of supererogation exist. In this section, I investigate how the supererogatory should be defined. My aim is not to provide a decisive answer to this question but rather to explain some of the key areas of debate on this issue.

There have been numerous attempts to provide a formal definition of supererogation, to the point where Heyd (2011) suggests that the concept is one “that cannot be captured by a strict formal definition.” Despite Heyd’s pessimism, the recent literature on the topic seems to be approaching a consensus on at least two issues concerning how to define supererogation. The first is that supererogatory acts are morally *optional*, meaning that both their performance and their omission are morally permissible (e.g. Archer 2016d: 334; Ferry 2013; Horgan and Timmons 2010: 37; Portmore 2011: 91; McElwee 2017: 506).

The second area of near consensus is to define supererogation in comparison to the minimum that is required by duty. Michael Ferry (2013: 574), for example, defines a supererogatory act as one that “is better than the minimally permissible act”. Similar comparative accounts are given by Archer (2016a: 334), Benn (2014: 59), McNamara (1996: 426) and Portmore (2011: 248). It is worth noting that the comparison being made here is not between all supererogatory acts and all obligatory acts, nor is the claim that all supererogatory acts are more valuable than all morally required acts; as Chisholm (1963: 8) points out, there are times where morality requires us to save a life and other times when performing a small favour is supererogatory. Rather, the comparison is between the moral value of a *particular* supererogatory action and the moral value of the other non-supererogatory alternative acts available to the agent at that time.

One reason to accept a comparative account is that it seems to be suggested by the ordinary language phrase ‘beyond the call of duty’, which is often taken to be equivalent to ‘supererogatory’. ‘Beyond’ is a comparative concept, so it is natural to think that only a comparative account of supererogation will be able to capture the relevant notion. Supererogation then ought to be defined in relation to the non-supererogatory alternatives available to an agent. This can be done by defining the supererogatory as an act that is morally better than the minimum that morality demands. However, this definition leaves it unclear exactly how to understand ‘the minimum that morality demands’. At least three options have been proposed: Zimmerman (1996: 236) suggests a time-relative account, McNamara (1996; 2011) a ranking of a set of worlds, and Sven Ove Hannson (2015) in terms of the minimal way of fulfilling a particular obligation. I do not have space to consider the comparative merits of these proposals.

Despite disagreement in the details, there is wide agreement that acts of supererogation are both morally optional and morally better than the minimum that morality demands. The next issue that arises in providing a definition of the supererogatory is whether satisfying these two conditions is sufficient for an act to be supererogatory. Some have argued that further conditions must be met in order for an act to be supererogatory. Heyd (1982: 115), for example, argues that an agent must possess altruistic intentions in order for her act to be supererogatory. This seems a strange stipulation, though, as it is far from clear why someone motivated to perform moral acts by justice rather than altruism cannot count as performing an act of supererogation (Archer 2013). Others claim that an act can only be supererogatory if it is praiseworthy (Horgan and Timmons 2010; McNamara 2011; Mellema 1991; Montague 1989). This condition is justified in different ways. Montague (1989: 102) argues from our intuitions about cases that a necessary connection between supererogation and praiseworthiness. Kawall (2003: 495), meanwhile, argues that it is useful to have a term that refers only to those cases where everything goes right. Neither argument is convincing. First, we do not need to appeal to a necessary connection exists between supererogation and praiseworthiness to explain the intuitions appealed to in Montague’s argument (Archer 2016b: 247-252). Moreover, a more restrictive definition of supererogation does not seem any more helpful than a less restrictive one in picking out the phenomena that generate the interesting philosophical questions.

Finally, Dale Dorsey (2013; 2016) proposes a radical rethinking of the concept of supererogation. According to Dorsey, supererogatory acts should be understood as those that are morally better than what an agent is *rationally required* to do, where an act is rationally required of an agent when the agent is required to do it all things considered. According to Dorsey, we are morally required to do whatever is morally best, though we are not always rationally required to perform the morally best act available. Dorsey argues that this account of supererogation is preferable to more traditional views as it can better handle the paradox of supererogation, which we will consider in the next section. Whatever the plausibility of this claim, it is worth noting that this account does not fit with how the phrase ‘beyond the call of duty’ is typically used, nor with Urmson’s reasons for why we have to make room for supererogation in the first place (Archer 2016c: 184-186).

1. **The Paradox of Supererogation**

This final section provides an overview of what has been called *the Paradox of Supererogation* (Horgan and Timmons 2010) and *the Problem of the Good-ought Tie-up* by others (Heyd 1982: 4). The problem arises from the following principle: t*he Good-ought Tie-up:* If an act is better supported by moral reasons than any alternative is, then it is morally obligatory.

The motivation for this claim is that what we morally ought to do should be closely related to what it would be morally good for us to do (Dreier 2004: 148). More formally, an act’s deontic properties ought to be determined by its evaluative properties. This claim seems plausible when considered on its own but problems arise when we consider it together with the following two other claims:

*Existence of Supererogatory Acts:* Acts of supererogation exist (or at least their existence is a possibility).

*Better but Not Required:* If an act is supererogatory, then it is not morally obligatory but is better supported by moral reasons than any alternative is.

These claims are inconsistent, as if we accept the Good-ought Tie-up then we must either accept that there are no supererogatory acts or that supererogatory acts are not better than moral requirements. To solve this paradox we must reject one of these three claims. In Section One we looked at how a rejection of the existence of acts of supererogation could be motivated. In Section Two we briefly examined Dorsey’s proposal to reject the definition of acts of supererogation in terms acts that are better than morally obligatory alternatives could be motivated. In this section we will look at ways in which the rejection of the good-ought tie-up might be justified.

One response, endorsed by Dreier (2004) and Horgan and Timmons (2010), is to claim that not all kinds of moral reasons are capable of generating moral requirements. I will call this view the Favouring Reasons View. According to Dreier (2004: 149), moral reasons can be divided into those concerned with justice and those concerned with beneficence. While reasons of justice are capable of generating moral requirements, reasons of beneficence are not. Likewise, Horgan and Timmons (2010: 47-50) defend a view on which moral reasons are capable of playing both a requiring role and a merit-conferring role. Accordingly, not all reasons that morally count in favour of performing an action are capable of generating moral requirements – they are merely merit conferring. These views solve the paradox by rejecting the claim that if an act is morally obligatory then there are no other available acts that are better supported by moral reasons. These views appear plausible when it comes to handling acts of supererogation for which there do not appear to be any strong reasons against performing the act. For example, the decision to give a small gift to a friend could plausibly be seen to be supported by moral reasons that favour but do not require.

However, they are less plausible when considering cases of supererogation that are supported by reasons that seem to have moral requiring force. Consider Urmson’s case of the soldier diving on the grenade. It does not seem plausible to think that the reasons that the soldier has to jump on the grenade, that it would save several lives, have only favouring force. Rather it seems like these reasons would generate a requirement were it not for the strong self-interested reasons that the soldier has not to throw himself on the grenade. Horgan and Timmons (2010: 60) accept that such acts exist and cannot fit in their account of supererogation but claim that acts like this are not real cases of supererogation and should instead be considered cases of quasi-supererogation. However, given the centrality of cases like Urmson’s soldier in the discussions about supererogation, this seems like an under motivated move.

The next solution is what I will call the Sacrifice View. According to this view, what prevents a morally optimal act from being morally obligatory is the level of sacrifice that it would involve for the agent. This means that the morally optimal act will not always be required, as there are times when the sacrifice involved in performing the morally best act will make it permissible to perform an act of lesser moral value. This view is endorsed by many working on supererogation (eg. Benn *Forthcoming*; Fishkin 1982: 14-15; Massoud 2016; Portmore 2011: 131-136; Scheffler 1994: 20) and appears to be the most popular solution to the paradox. It is easy to see the view’s appeal. Many cases of supererogation, such as Urmson’s soldier, involve great cost to the agent. Moreover, it is plausible that in cases like this, if there were no cost then the act would be required (Archer 2016a), which suggests that it is the level of sacrifice involved that what prevents the act from being obligatory.

However, this view faces two problems.[[2]](#footnote-2) First, it generates implausible results in cases where performing a supererogatory act imposes no cost to the agent. This may involve trivial cases, like buying a gift for a friend where the joy of giving outweighs the price of the gift (Ferry 2013), or serious cases, such as risking one’s life to save others. Often people who perform acts we think of as supererogatory claim that they would have been unable to live with themselves if they had not acted as they did, and many also report feeling a rewarding sense of inner satisfaction after performing these actions (Archer 2016a). If those who acted in this way would have been unable to forgive themselves had they acted differently, then we might think that it would not have been in their self-interest to act differently. This creates problems for The Sacrifice View, as it is committed to saying that these acts are required for these agents (Archer 2016a; 2017: 234).

The Sacrifice View also has problems handling cases of moral necessity (Archer 2015). According to The Sacrifice View, in order for an act to be supererogatory it must involve greater costs to the agent than some other available option. An implication of this view is that there must have been some alternative way of acting available to the agent. This is problematic however, as it seems that for at least for some cases of supererogation, such options are not available. The reason for this is that many who perform seemingly supererogatory acts claim that they could not have acted otherwise (Archer 2015). As we have seen, these claims are plausibly understood as describing a form of what Bernard Williams (1993) calls a moral incapacity. If we accept that such necessities exist then these agents did not have the option of acting otherwise and so cannot have been said to have performed an act of supererogation according to The Sacrifice View.

If we reject the Favouring Reasons View and the Sacrifice View then how else can we make room for supererogation? One alternative, suggested by Ferry (2013), is to understand moral obligations not in terms of what an agent has most reason to do but instead by what other people have most reason to hold the agent accountable for. This view avoids the objections raised against the Sacrifice View. However, it may face problems in avoiding wrong kinds of reasons cases, where other members of the moral community are given reason to hold an agent accountable for an action that have nothing to do with the reasons for or against performing the act (Cf. Bedke 2011: 144-147).

The final account I will consider is what I will call the Freedom View. According to this view an important part of a meaningful life is having the space and freedom (within certain constraints) to choose what to prioritize. Moral requirements then, should not be so extensive as to prevent us from having the space to make these choices. A number of theorists defend something like this view of the limit of obligations (See Archer 2016a; 2017; Heyd 1982 pp.172-175 and Igneski 2008). And while it is able to avoid at least some of the problems raised against the other views (see Archer 2016a), it might be objected that this view does not really solve the problem. For unlike the other solutions, the Freedom View does not provide an alternative account of the connection between reasons and obligations to replace the Good-Ought Tie-Up. However, it should be noted that providing such an account is not necessary to solve the Paradox of Supererogation.

**Conclusion**

I have provided an overview of three major issues in the recent literature on supererogation. First I looked at whether there is good reason to think that acts of supererogation. Second, I examined the question of how supererogation is to be defined. Finally, I examined the Paradox of Supererogation and surveyed a number of possible responses to it. None of these issues are easily settled and all are likely to continue being discussed in the literature for some time. Supererogation raises a number of further important philosophical questions that I have been able to address in this article. Most importantly, I have not examined the issue of how particular theories of normative ethics can be reconciled with the possibility of acts of supererogation. Nor have I investigated the issue of whether supererogation exists in other areas of normativity such as the epistemic or aesthetic domain.

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1. Dougherty (2017) defends the same view for similar reasons. See Nauman (2017) for a discussion of the agent-observer disparity from a Kantian perspective. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. An additional problem that I do not have the space to investigate here is raised by Dorsey (2013; 2016) who argues that this view generates implausible results when we compare the interaction of moral and non-moral reasons in a triad of cases. See Archer (2016d) and Portmore (2017) for two ways of responding to this problem. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)